



1ST U.S. COLORED HEAVY ARTILLERY



“Ready to Take the Field”



Gen. Davis Tillson raised the 1,700-man 1st U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery in Tennessee and North Carolina in 1864. The unit encamped nearby while garrisoned in Asheville in 1865. Assigned to Tillson’s 2nd brigade, the men participated in operations in Tennessee and Alabama and joined Gen. George Stoneman in Virginia and North Carolina in 1865. Stoneman reported that the unit had 1,100 men “ready to take the field.”



Heavy artillery units typically manned large pieces in fixed positions but later in the war served smaller cannons, such as Napoleons, in the field.
Courtesy Library of Congress

On April 27, 1865, Tillson wrote, “The ... First U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery ... were moved toward Asheville, N.C. ... arriving there on [April] 30th.”

To many white Southerners, the appearance of African American soldiers symbolized defeat. Local resident Forster A. Sondley wrote, “Negro sentinels were placed at the approaches to the town in order that no insult might be spared to a devoted people.” Sarah Bailey Cain recalled, “We passed through an immense crowd of ... privates and insolent Negroes in U.S. uniforms. One of the Negroes called out to my father ‘How do you like this, old man?’”



Gen. Davis Tillson
Courtesy Library of Congress

Tillson accepted the surrender of Confederate Col. William M. Bradford and his troops at Asheville on May 6. The 1st U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery stayed in the area until May 18, then served in Tennessee until mustered out on March 31, 1866. After the war, Tillson oversaw the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen’s Bureau) in Tennessee and Georgia.



Recruiting broadside, “Come and Join Us Brothers” – Courtesy Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University

Four soldiers of the 1st U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery were executed nearby on May 6, 1865. The next day, Col. Chauncey G. Hawley reported that the men “who committed the rape, except one witness, four in number, were shot yesterday, before the whole regiment.” Gen. Davis Tillson wrote that they “stole out of camp on the march to Asheville and committed a brutal rape on the person of a young white woman, after nearly killing her uncle and aunt, two very old people, who tried to prevent the outrage. I am much gratified that they have been found and shot.” The execution and burial of Pvt. Alfred Catlett, Alexander Colwell, Washington Jackson, and Charles Turner of Co. E took place at the present-day junction of Broadway with Mt. Clare Avenue and Chestnut Street (Five Points). About 1900, workers on Mt. Clare Avenue uncovered their graves. They were reburied nearby, but the location is not known.